

Rasmussen-Donahue House
780 South Ocean Boulevard
Palm Beach
Palm Beach County
Florida

HABS No. FLA-229

HABS,
FLA,
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PHOTOGRAPHS
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

RASMUSSEN-DONAHUE HOUSE

Location: 780 South Ocean Boulevard, Palm Beach, Palm Beach County, Florida.

Present Owner: Mrs. Woolworth Donahue.

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Present Use: Vacant.

Significance: This Mizner-designed house represents the work of one of the most influential and noted architects of Florida's lower east coast, who transformed the architecture of that area from the shingle cottage of the early days to the romantic Spanish villa of the 1920s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Between 1920 and 1928, ca. 1923-1924.
2. Architect: Addison Mizner (1872-1933). [See Physical History, The Everglades Club, HABS No. FLA-226.]
3. Original and subsequent owners: George S. Rasmussen, Danish-born food merchant, and president of the National Tea Company from approximately 1902 until 1936. In 1927 the house was bought by Mr. and Mrs. William Donahue.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: While Addison Mizner turned over his sketches and colored drawings of his houses to contractors to decipher and put together, little is known here of the men into whose hands he delivered them, save a reference in Orr to Lester Geisler, of Kissimmee, Florida. Nevertheless, the information available about his work with artisans and the creation of his own factory for tiles, cast-concrete "sculpture," and other building elements, indicates that Mizner himself was the supplier for much of his architectural work, including this house. Furthermore, in spite of engaging foremen, Addison Mizner also supervised much of the work. In addition, Mizner was his own landscapist and designed much of the ground layout for his structures.
5. Original plan and construction: The building is Italianate in effect, with Venetian cusped window arches and Venetian chimney pieces, attached columns, balustrades, and landscaped gardens with fountain and pool. Mizner was a creator of landscapes as well as of Spanish castle-villas.
6. Alterations: The old 1928 views show the exterior as it is now, except for the recent alterations and the absence of leaded glass in the loggias at that time.

The central first-floor loggia's chandelier was there in 1928. The medallions over the doors in this room were not there in 1928, and must have been added afterward. Most of the alterations which seem to have been done within the last year (1971) or are being now completed include the additions of the exterior second-floor balcony on the southeast wall (a replica of the balcony on the northeast), for which two doors were cut out of the window areas; the modernization of the pool cabana on the interior, and glazing; the glazing of the main exterior stairway by squaring off the columns and inserting framed glass windows. [The Johnston version of the positioning of the stairs for the Rasmussen house indicates that the stairs were deliberately designed originally for the outside wall, in an effort by Addison Mizner to imitate an "Old World" castle where the stairs were semi-protected by a tower in the outer wall. [Johnston, pp. 33-34; Orr, pp. 25-26, with old views of stairs.]

The second-floor loggia is basically unchanged. The south bedrooms have been changed from two rooms into one master bedroom. The interior of this room has been almost entirely remodeled.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

George S. Rasmussen, for whom Addison Mizner built this house, was a significant figure in the history of self-made men. Born in Denmark in 1872, after four years as a grocery clerk apprentice he emigrated to the United States in 1891. After managing meats for the W. A. Wieboldt Company of Chicago, for some years, he established the beginning of his own grocery chain, left Wieboldt, and organized his stores into the National Tea Company, of which he was president until shortly before his death in 1936. The firm grew into a widely known food distribution company, enlarged by the acquisition from time to time of large blocks of stores from the Cooperative Society of America, John R. Thompson Co. of Chicago, Piggly Wiggly Stores Co., Consumer's Wholesale Grocers, Great American Stores Co., Red Ball chain stores in Iowa, and others.

Rasmussen was also an art collector, holding many famous paintings and engravings as well as bronzes and china. He bred horses and cattle, had a large herd of Holstein cattle at Lake Forest, and a racing stable in Denmark. He was married in Chicago, May 19, 1906, to Nanna, daughter of Nis Johansen Hansen, and they had two sons, Robert Vernon and George Rasmussen. The Rasmussen house was sold to Mr. and Mrs. William Donahue in 1927. Rasmussen died at Solyst, Klampenborg, Denmark, Aug. 23, 1936.

The other, if not the principal, historic figure connected with this structure was Addison Mizner himself, and as with all his structures, in addition to the materials from his factory, many of the elements he Mizner chose for special houses he had collected as he traveled abroad. In the south, first-floor, parlor of the Rasmussen-Donahue house, the massive fireplace is said to have come from Europe. The "H" and crown crest on the parlor's center bay would refer to King Henry II of France.

The interlocking "D" in the entablature would refer to Diane de Poitiers, who became Henry's mistress in 1536, while he was dauphin. When Henry became King of France in 1547, Diane became essentially the Queen, even though Henry had been married to Catherine de Medici in 1533. In 1550, Henry II had the Chateau d'Anet built for Diane. The noted architect, Philibert de L'Orme, designed the chateau, while the sculptural decoration was by Jean Goujon. This chateau has been largely dismantled, its fragments recovered and used in other sites, one of the principal ones being the courtyard of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where the entire frontispiece was re-erected. The fireplace in the Rasmussen-Donahue house is believed to have come from Chateau d'Anet with the historical objects Mizner brought to Palm Beach from a period four hundred years before.

C. Bibliography:

1. Original and unpublished sources:

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Orr-Cahall, Christina. The Architecture and Decorative Arts of Addison Mizner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

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Prepared by: Bryan Bowman, Student Historian, University of Florida and Prof. Woodrow W. Wilkins, University of Miami, Project Supervisor, Summer 1971.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The combination of Venetian-Spanish-Mediterranean aspects here was Addison Mizner's trademark, by which he devised variations on the memories of Crusaders, early merchants and traders, and princes of royal blood, to achieve amenities and grandeur felt suitable both to the climate and the clientele of Florida in the 1920s, where the comfort of cross-ventilation was achieved by the grandeur of two-story loggias.
2. Condition of fabric: The fabric is sound. It is currently undergoing renovations which may destroy some interior character.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The north-south dimension is approximately 158'-0", and the east-west dimension, including terraces and the stair tower, is approximately 69'-0". The main living room is two stories in height, and the service wing on the north has three stories.
2. Foundations: Not known.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Exterior walls are frame, with hollow clay tile, stuccoed, and painted cream color.
4. Structural system, framing: There were wood beams and floor joists. Roof framing is reinforced with what appears to be new metal tie-rods.
5. Porches, terraces:
 - a. There is a continuous open terrace at the southeast corner of the house, measuring 63'-0" in the north-south direction. The floor is of clay tile. It is enclosed on the east and south with a cast-concrete balustrade.
 - b. A similar terrace on the west is located between the stair tower and the parlor. It is approximately 37'-6" in length. There are two balconies on the east facade. The one on the north is bracketed and appears in early photographs. A replica has been added at the south end, outside the master bedroom.
6. Chimneys: All chimneys are stuccoed, several of which have clay tile chimney caps. On the south wall of the central bedroom the chimney is supported by brackets at the second floor.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance from the motor court is through an ogee-arched opening at the stair tower.

The entrance is trimmed with cast-concrete billet-and-cable moldings and a finial at the top. Above the transom bar, the solid tympanum contains a heraldic emblem. The original filigreed and wrought-iron gates have been removed.

Other major exterior doorways are incorporated in the arcaded east and west walls of the glazed loggia. This arcade consists of five tre-foil ogee arches supported by engaged cast-concrete columns with modified Corinthian capitals. All openings are glazed for the full height, 13'-0", with leaded glass in a 5" x 15" vertical hexagonal pattern. Three sets of French doors are located in the center bays.

- b. Windows openings: On the second-floor loggia, the arcaded pattern of the first-floor loggia below is repeated to enclose leaded glass operating windows in the three center bays, and leaded fixed glass in the outer bays. Spandrels between the engaged columns and the window sills are stuccoed.

Above the rectangular windows, the tympanum is filled in with red brick on the east wall, and with brick painted white on the west wall. All other windows are wood casements with concrete transom bars, with rectangular transoms above, except in some cases where solid tympanums are enclosed by trefoil ogee arched heads.

8. Roofs:

- a. Shape, covering: Roofs are hipped and covered with red tile.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Simple molded cornice is supported by brackets under the 2'-0" eaves.
- c. Tower: On the motor court on the west there is a large circular tower in which is located the main entrance doorway and the monumental circular stairway. The exterior wall is an open stepped Corinthian arcade following the rise of the stairs. Construction work is under way to glaze this arcade. The cast-concrete stairs spiral around a wide open well. The balustrade is cast concrete. The walls are scored to imitate rustication.

Entrance to the two foyers at the upper level is through double sliding doors with carved rosettes in the panels. At the motor-court level were wrought-iron gates which are not in place. The ceiling is exposed pecky-cypress rafters framing to an octagonal wood compression ring. The exposed decking is also pecky cypress. Suspended from the ceiling on a single chain are two cage lanterns at different levels.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. First-floor plan: The entrance at the motor court is a wedge-shaped landing with a circular stairs leading down to the basement on the left, and up to the main living floors on the right. The stair landing at the first floor leads directly to a rectangular foyer, beyond which, to the east, is the dining room facing the ocean. A doorway on the left leads to the kitchen and serving pantries, which extend northward for approximately 65 feet. The doorway on the south wall of the foyer leads to a large glazed loggia and the parlor beyond. Both loggia and parlor open to terraces on the east and west of the house.
 - a. Foyer: Floors and baseboard are of black marble. Painted stucco walls are scored in ashlar pattern. The ceiling is decorated with elaborate wood coffering. All doorway openings have chamfered edges to which is applied a cable molding.
 - b. Loggia: Floors are inlaid black and red marble with black marble baseboard. Walls are painted plaster with surrounds of doorways scored to simulate rustication. The exposed beams and joists in the ceiling are painted cream with the inset pilaster painted to imitate wood grain. The doorway on the north wall is arched, over which is a rectangular carved medallion of Helen. The south doorway is rectangular and has a medallion of Paris over it. The Venetian Gothic doorways, described on the exterior, lead to east and west terraces. A wrought-iron chandelier appears to be original.
 - c. Dining room: The floor is oak parquetry. Walls are boiserie in weathered cypress finish. Egg-and-dart molding predominates in the trim. There is a carved bracketed cornice with triglyphs and metopes, the latter decorated with acanthus carvings. The ceiling is coffered in interlocking hexagons. The doors are paneled to harmonize with the walls. Entablatures matching the cornice are located at the heads. Bronze hardware appears to be original.

On the north wall the cast-concrete fireplace simulates cut limestone. Above the mantel, fluted Ionic pilasters support an entablature which is a projection of the main cornice.

- d. Parlor: The floor is oak parquetry. Walls are also boiserie, with chain-like molding between the panels. The cornice is bracketed. Exposed beams and joists are decorated in green and gold. Double doors lead to the loggia, and a single door leads to the west terrace. The hardware is similar to that in the dining room.

The outstanding feature of the parlor is the fireplace on the north wall. Fluted marble pilasters support a marble entablature decorated in the center with three fleur-de-lis and on each end over the pilasters are inset panels containing the initials "D" interlocked, with the right one reversed. Above this entablature are four engaged Corinthianesque columns, framing niches at the end bays and a center bay containing an heraldic emblem with the letter "H" and a crown. Above the columns is a marble entablature and a broken pediment. The fireplace opening has a retractable metal screen.

- e. Cloakroom: The floor is red marble. The baseboard is 1'-8" high, executed in glazed tiles which were in process of being removed. Plaster above is painted to imitate wallpaper. The wood coffered ceiling is painted in antique gold. The carved wood door is set below a molded ogee arch which has been filled in. Windows are wood casement. The hanging ceiling light fixture is possibly original.
2. Second-floor plan: The stairs lead to an arrangement of closets and two narrow foyers. The diagonal foyer to the right leads to a glazed loggia from which a set of elliptical steps on the south wall leads to the master bedroom suite which contains closets, a bath, and kitchen. The second foyer leads to a second large bedroom and bath. A passage, and stairs down, on the north lead to a series of bedrooms and baths.
- a. Foyer to loggia: The floor is white marble. There are two risers up to the loggia. Walls are scored in ashlar pattern. Ceiling is painted plaster. Carved wood doors trimmed with acanthus lead to the stair well. A leaded bronze lamp is suspended from the ceiling.
 - b. Loggia: Flooring is white and ochre square marble pavers with a double-banded border in black and white marble. The 4" baseboard is black marble. On the south wall, white marble steps, six risers, lead to the master bedroom suite. Lower treads are elliptical. Walls are marbelized wood panels decorated with gold leaf rosettes, festoons, and fluted accents. The ceiling is painted plaster. The door is paneled with an acanthus leaf architrave. There are five leaded-glass windows each on the east and west, with the three center units being operating wood casements. The hanging lamp is a classic Roman bronze lamp.
 - c. Master suite: Formerly consisting of two bedrooms and two baths on the south end of the house, this suite has been renovated into one large bedroom with a bath on the west and a kitchenette on the east, separated by closets and entrance foyer. The floor is wood. Doors are wood paneled.

The original boiserie walls with marbelized insets are currently being reworked with wallpaper and plaster. Two windows on the east wall have been converted to French doors leading to a balcony which is not original. The remaining windows are three-light casements.

- d. Foyer to bedrooms: Floors here are dark parquetry. Walls and ceilings are painted plaster. Double doors in natural finish lead to stair well. The door to the bedroom is paneled with a gilt edge. A hanging bronze lamp is leaded in green, blue, and clear glass.
- e. Bedroom opposite stair well: Floors in this bedroom are dark parquetry. Walls above the chair rail are paneled with applied wood trim over wallpaper. The chair rail and the plaster below are painted green. Corners of the room are rounded. Ceiling is painted plaster. The cornice is decorated with modified acanthus molding. Windows are wood casements. French doors lead to the original balcony. Other doors are paneled.

The fireplace on the south wall is framed by two white marble fluted pilasters supporting a molded white marble mantel, above which is a mirror framed by ribbon molding.

- f. Bedroom corridor: Approximately 10'-10" north of the foyer, steps consisting of eight risers lead down to the level of the sleeping area in the north wing. The floor is dark parquetry. Walls are plaster painted light cream. The plaster ceiling is vaulted. Doors are painted an antique ivory with gilt-edged paneling. Metal brackets support the velvet-covered handrail at the stairs. There are two wrought-iron lamps in the ceiling.
- g. East center bedroom: A new flight of steps, parallel to the corridor steps, has been installed on the right of the fireplace on the south wall, cutting through a large closet area of the adjoining bedroom on the south. Floors here are of oak. Walls and ceiling are painted plaster. The exposed beams and joists are decoratively painted in earth tones--browns, cream, ochre, and green, with burnt sienna highlights. Doors are wood paneled. Windows are casements with wood paneling above.

The fireplace on the south wall is composed of two fluted pilasters supporting a bracketed entablature decorated with acanthus leaves. The edge of the mantel is decorated with egg-and-dart motif. A painted wrought-iron lamp in bad repair hangs from the ceiling.

- h. Northeast bedroom: The floor is laid in a light and dark basketweave pattern. Ceiling and walls are painted turquoise blue with trim below the wainscot simulating paneling. Doors are paneled. Window and door trim is modified egg-and-dart design.

The fireplace on the north wall duplicates that in the bedroom opposite the stair well, with the mirror omitted.

- i. Remaining bedrooms: The two remaining bedrooms are similar in finish. One is west of the stair well, and the other occupies the entire north end of the house. Floors are carpeted, walls and ceiling are painted plaster, doors are of wood, paneled, and windows are wood casements. Trim is flat.

D. Site and surroundings:

- 1. General setting: The long axis of the house is in the north-south direction, parallel to Ocean Boulevard (U. S. Highway 1A). The property extends from the Atlantic Ocean on the east to South County Road on the west. On the east side of 1A is a six-foot seawall, and an area of wild sea grass and Spanish bayonets, separated from the highway by a five-foot wall. An opening in the wall and a path leads to wooden steps down to the beach.

West of the highway is a similar wall and windbreak of sea grape. From here a grass lawn stretches up to the east terrace.

The property boundary on the north is a two-foot wall, inside of which is a concrete-block path extending from an unused patio on the northeast corner of the house, to the highway.

The southern boundary is defined by a wall belonging to the adjacent property.

The property west of the house is graded at two levels and enclosed by an eight-foot high, buttressed, concrete wall along South County Road. Entrance to the graveled drive is between two black aluminum gates. The driveway circles northeastward to the graveled auto court, divided on the east-west axis by a planted median strip. The driveway is at the grade of South County Road.

Seven risers above the auto court, on the south, is a terrace with a swimming pool, cabana, and tennis court. On a knoll above the pool patio is an ornamental fountain, overlooking a reflecting pool at the County Road level below. A curved concrete stairway with coping wall on the south leads from the fountain level. Cut coral pavers lead from the fountain level to the auto court. The face of the retaining wall for the fountain terrace is composed of pilasters and decorative acanthus insets in a circular motif. This wall also contains a small fountain.

A service gate and graveled drive north of the main gates leads directly to a three-car garage and caretaker's apartment above. The service drive continues past the garage to the service wing of the house.

2. Outbuildings: The garage apartment on the northwest corner of the property is stuccoed masonry, with a red tile roof. The interior has recently been remodeled with a modern kitchen, living room, two bedrooms, and two baths. The paneled door and wood casements are original.

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Florida project to survey the historic architecture of Palm Beach and to emphasize written historical and architectural data was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), in cooperation with the Historical Society of Palm Beach County and the Florida Board of Archives and History, in the summer of 1971. Under the direction of James C. Massey, then Chief of HABS, the project was carried out in the Historic American Buildings Survey field office in the Flagler Museum, Whitehall Way, Palm Beach, with Professor Woodrow W. Wilkins, AIA (University of Miami) Project Supervisor; Richard C. Crisson, Architect (University of Florida); Richard High, Student Architect (Georgia Institute of Technology); and Bryan Bowman, Student Historian (University of Florida). Under the general direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS from March 1972, additional documentation was prepared. Archival photographs for the project were taken in April 1972 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS photographer. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in 1980 in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.